

Raising Bilingual Children

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Did you know that you can help your child's future by continuing to use your own language in the home? Many studies in Canada and the United States have shown that children who start learning English when they begin school are not at a disadvantage— as long as they maintain and continue to develop in their first language. In fact, children who are equally skilled in two or more languages have some definite advantages! This is the reason that many English speaking parents send their children to French Immersion schools.

Here are some reasons for helping your children to continue to develop in your home language:

- Maintaining your heritage language in the home helps families to maintain good communication and close family ties.
- Their first language can be an important source of pride and cultural identity for children who are living in two cultures.
- Children who can think and work in more than one language are often more mentally flexible than children who can use only one language.
- Children who have a strong foundation in their own language, and who continue to develop at an age-appropriate level in that language, will learn English better than children who stop developing in their own language when they enter an English-language school environment.
- It takes **at least five years** for children to learn English sufficiently well to be able to do the kind of thinking, problem solving, reading, and writing that they have to do in school. Therefore it is to their advantage if they can continue to think and solve problems in their first language, at least until English catches up.
- Bilingual children are often very good language learners when it comes to learning French or any other language at school.
- People who are fully bilingual may have more opportunities for employment.

How can you help your child to become bilingual?

- Don't worry about speaking English at home. You can help your child more by providing a good model of your own language! Your child will be exposed to plenty of English at school, in the community, on TV, etc. Unless you are completely bilingual, concentrate on making sure that your child is exposed to many examples of your own language, both formal and informal.

- Talk to your child in your first language. For example, with young children, maintain a running commentary on what you are both doing. Tell stories, sing or play songs to your child, share proverbs, and recite poems. With children of all ages, make sure to talk often: tell them about your day, ask them about their day, discuss something in the news, and so on.
- Read to and with your child in your first language.
- Read a community language newspaper, watch TV shows in your language, and rent videos.
- Take your child with you to community events where they may hear your language spoken in more formal settings.
- Talk with your child's teacher about your wish to raise a bilingual child, and give a copy of this article to the teacher.
- Encourage your child to develop some school projects and assignments in two languages: for example, labelling a picture in both languages, creating a bilingual picture book, or writing first drafts and outlines in the first language.
- Volunteer to help in your child's school: maybe you can help a child who is learning just beginning to learn English. In this way you can not only help the child to understand what's going on, but also be an example to all the children and the teachers of the advantages of knowing more than one language.
- Enroll your child in a Heritage Language class, and visit the class to show support for the teacher. Sometimes children are naturally reluctant to attend Heritage Language classes that are held on weekends: they would rather be out playing or socializing with their friends. Speak to the school principal about including heritage language classes during the school day. Did you know that Ontario secondary schools may offer credit courses in any language as long as there are sufficient students to make up a class? Unfortunately, many language departments do not think of languages other than French, Italian, or Spanish— so it is important to speak up on behalf of your community and request courses in your language.

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